

**DEMOCRATIZATION VERSUS  
LIBERALIZATION IN THE ARAB WORLD:  
DILEMMAS AND CHALLENGES  
FOR U.S FOREIGN POLICY**

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## FOREWORD

The question of democracy in the Middle East has become an issue of high politics and high policymaking for the U.S. Government. Yet in the process of rising to such a salient position in the foreign policy agenda, many of the nuances and complexities that promoting democracy in the Middle East encounters have received inadequate analysis.

The central distinction between political liberalization and democratization is particularly important. Political liberalization is not a phase in an inevitable transition to democracy in the Arab world, but rather a hybrid system that blends liberalization and autocracy. For the United States, a key question it must tackle is whether it should push Arab regimes to move beyond the boundaries of liberalized autocracy. The answer is far from obvious, since any push for substantive democratization could empower Islamists, and/or re-ignite sectarian, religious, or ideological conflict in countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, or Yemen.

This monograph, by Dr. Daniel Brumberg, is an important contribution to the public debate on these vital issues.



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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

DANIEL BRUMBERG serves as a special adviser for the United States Institute of Peace in the Muslim World Initiative, where he focuses on issues of democratization and political reform in the Middle East and wider Islamic world. He is also an associate professor at Georgetown University and is a former senior associate in the Carnegie Endowment's Democracy and Rule of Law Project (2003-04). Dr. Brumberg previously was a Jennings Randolph senior fellow at the U.S. Institute of Peace, where he pursued a study of power sharing in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. In 1997, he was a Mellon junior fellow at Georgetown University and a visiting fellow at the International Forum on Democratic Studies. He was a visiting professor in the Department of Political Science at Emory University, a visiting fellow in the Middle East Program in the Jimmy Carter Center, and has taught at the University of Chicago. Dr. Brumberg is the author of many articles on political and social change in the Middle East and wider Islamic world. With a grant from the MacArthur Foundation, he is currently working on a comparative study of power sharing experiments in Algeria, Kuwait, and Indonesia. A member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Democracy* and the advisory board of the International Forum on Democratic Studies, Dr. Brumberg is also chairman of the nonprofit Foundation on Democratization and Political Change in the Middle East. He has worked closely with a number of nongovernment organizations in the Arab world, including the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA). He is also a member of the editorial board of the American Political Science Association's *Political Science and Politics*. Dr. Brumberg received his B.A. from Indiana University and his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

## SUMMARY

This monograph looks at the political origins and dynamics of “liberalized autocracy” in the Arab world. Liberalized autocracy is a system of rule that allows for a measure of political openness and competition in the electoral, party, and press arenas, while ultimately ensuring that power rests in the hands of ruling regimes. This mix of control and openness has not only benefitted ruling elites, but oppositions as well. It gives them room to “let off steam,” to criticize regimes, and occasionally to affect public policy. Moreover, given the absence of consensus in many Arab states over national identity, liberalized autocracy has provided an umbrella by which competing groups—Islamists, secularists, Kurds, and Berbers—can achieve a measure of peaceful coexistence precisely because no group actually wields power. The United States largely has supported such hybrid systems, a fact of political life that has not changed dramatically under the Bush administration despite its rhetorical commitment to democracy. Whether the gap between words and deeds should or can be closed or narrowed is a complex question, since a sudden move from state managed liberalization to democracy could open the door to Islamist power.



# **DEMOCRATIZATION VERSUS LIBERALIZATION IN THE ARAB WORLD: DILEMMAS AND CHALLENGES FOR U.S FOREIGN POLICY**

## **Introduction: Between Philosophy and Policy.**

In his November 6, 2003, speech before the National Endowment for Democracy, President Bush laid out an ambitious vision for a “forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East.” While some observers attributed the speech to the White House’s desire to redefine the very purpose of the Iraq war, the fact of the matter is the administration’s neo-conservatives long have argued that the toppling of Saddam Hussein was the first shot in a long campaign to democratize the Middle East. Bush’s speech clearly showed that the President has fully embraced the neo-conservatives’ conviction that it is the “calling” of the United States (as he put it), to extend the global democratic revolution to the Middle East.

Will such idealism withstand the test of time and circumstance? Thus far, the administration has adopted a philosophy rather than a strategy, an aspiration rather than a coherent plan. As a result, it has been operating on a kind of default policy mechanism, whose main outlines defer to the “liberalization strategy” that has guided the Middle East democracy aid programs of the United States for nearly a decade. That strategy calls for reinforcing civil society organizations in the hope that they eventually will push ruling elites to move beyond state-managed political liberalization strategies—strategies that Arab elites have used to *avoid* the challenges of democratization. This “demand side” approach has been welcomed by the rulers of what I call “liberalized autocracies” for obvious reasons: Insofar as the rulers of Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait, and Yemen depend on a certain measure of state managed pluralism to maintain their rule, American aid programs that encourage a gradual opening up and pluralizing of civil society are, by design or default, consonant with the regime survival strategies of Arab rulers. Thus the obvious questions that are central to this monograph: Can or should the United States encourage Arab leaders to move beyond

the confines of state enforced pluralism? Can political liberalization be transformed into a handmaiden of democratization rather than an adjunct of liberalized autocracy?

As we shall see, the answers are far from clear or obvious. To move beyond the piecemeal liberalization approach that has long guided our Middle East democracy aid programs, the United States must reinforce its traditional “demand side” civil society policies with a “supply side” focus that tackles the key problem: the institutions and ruling ideologies of Arab states. Such a shift will be very difficult, since it will require pressuring some of the very Arab leaders whose support on the war on terrorism the administration needs. Moreover, inasmuch as a state-focused, supply side approach could open the door to Islamist political power, the United States will have to carefully assess where and when a democratization strategy is least likely to create a zero-sum conflict between Islamist oppositions and the state. Since such a conflict benefits only two players—Islamists and regime hard-liners—the most likely candidates for a successful democratization strategy will be those whose party systems *already* boast a level of ideological pluralism sufficient to contain the challenge of Islamist parties. For reasons I will explain below, I believe that Morocco is one of the few countries in the Arab world where the risks of a full blown democratization strategy might be worth taking.

Finally, I should state for the record that as far as I am concerned, no serious democratization strategy has the slightest chance of success so long as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict continues to simmer and periodically blow up. Unless the administration shows in words and, most important, in deeds that it believes that the Palestinians are as deserving of independence and democracy as are the Iraqis, all the talk of democratization in the Arab world will ring hollow in the minds of a vast majority of Arab youth.

## The “Democracy Gap.”

Since September 11, 2001 (9/11), the democracy gap in the Middle East has become a focus of public debate in the United States and of high policy in the Bush administration itself. But for those who have long studied the region or the wider problem of democratization,

the subject is not new. For a decade Freedom House's annual reports have charted the nondemocratic nature of Middle East regimes along two axes: political rights and civil liberties. Year after year, the region has come up short, not only by comparison to the industrialized West but, more importantly, by comparison to other Third World states that have significant Muslim pluralities (such as India) or majorities, such as Indonesia. Thus the Middle East, and the Arab world in particular, has proven one of the most democracy resistant regions of the world. Yet these same figures also suggest, albeit in inadequate ways, some interesting nuances.<sup>1</sup> Six Middle East states—Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen—score worse along the political rights axis than they do along the civil liberties axis. In other words, while there is a general shortage of formal democracy, a few of the region's autocracies tolerate varying degrees of political pluralism and openness. Freedom House's “partly free” category—which is assigned to Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Turkey—gets at this interesting nuance. But it fails to fully capture the number of Arab regimes whose endurance can be explained in part by a heritage of political eclecticism. For this reason, Table 1 includes a “regime type” category that puts the region in a different light. As the table indicates, only a minority of Middle East regimes (seven, including Iran and the former Iraq) can be called “full autocracies,” by which I mean regimes that tolerate no dissent and permit not a shred of independent democratic practice. The vast majority are partial autocracies, or what I call “liberalized autocracies.” Unlike full autocracies, whose survival depends on quashing all political competition, the very endurance of liberalized autocracies depends on acquiescing to, or even promoting, a measure of state managed political openness.

## **The Logic of Liberalized Autocracy.**

Liberalized autocracies are not unique to the Middle East. Semi-autocracies of one kind or another dot the globe, a tribute to the fact that the so-called “global democratic revolution” was less a consequence of some kind of Hegelian dialectic by which the democratic idea magically conquered the world, as it was a consequence of the political and economic failure of full autocracies.

Country	FH 1993 Rankings (PR, CL*)	Regime Type
Algeria	6,5 Not Free	Partial Autocracy
Bahrain	5,5 Partly Free (6,5 2002)	Partial Autocracy
Egypt	6,6 Not Free	Partial Autocracy
Iran	6,6 Not Free	Towards Full Autocracy?
Iraq	7,7 Not Free	Collapsed Full Autocracy
Jordan	6,5 Partly Free (5,5 2002)	Partial Autocracy
Kuwait	4,5 Partly Free	Partial Autocracy
Lebanon	6,5 Not Free	Partial Autocracy
Libya	7,7 Not Free	Full Autocracy
Morocco	5,5 Partly Free	Partial Autocracy
Oman	6,5 Not Free	Partial Autocracy
Qatar	6,6 Not Free	Partial Autocracy
Saudi Arabia	7,7 Not Free	Full Autocracy
Syria	7,7 Not Free	Full Autocracy
Tunisia	7,7 Not Free	Full Autocracy
Turkey	3,4 Partly Free	Illiberal Democracy
United Arab Emirates	6,5 Not Free	Full Autocracy
Yemen	6,5 Not Free (6,6 2002)	Partial Autocracy

Note: Best rating is 1, worst rating is 7. (\*PR- political rights, CL- civil liberties)

**Table 1. Muslim Majority Middle East States.**

But if what scholars of modern Russia call “managed pluralism” has its analogues in the Arab world, the region’s liberalized autocracies have ideological, social, political, and institutional traits specific to the region.<sup>2</sup> The distinctive quality of liberalized autocracies creates a complex challenge for any serious Middle East democratization strategy.

Like all semi-authoritarian political systems, those in the Middle East rely on a complex system of opening and closing, loosening and tightening, whose vague contours are designed to keep opposition forces off balance. State-managed control of elections, political parties, the “opposition press,” and civil society institutions creates a safety valve that gives opposition forces a means to release steam while enhancing the capacities of regimes to divide the opposition, and to gather useful information on the nature and scope of their opponents. As the late Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat once put it, “democracy is a safety valve so I know what my enemies are doing.”

But it would be a mistake to see liberalized autocracy as merely a regime survival tactic. Instead, it is an integrated *system* whose internal rules and logic not only serve the interests of rulers, but also those of many (but not all) mainstream opposition elites. Although these elites often complain about the limits placed by the state on democratic expression, the din of their criticism often masks a rough consensus regarding the preferability of liberalized autocracy over the black hole of full or rapid democratization.

The roots of this rough consensus can be traced to a legacy of political development in the Arab world that is some 4 decades old. First, the region suffers from an enduring heritage of depoliticization. Political life has been dominated by elites who operate through patron-client networks or formal corporatist channels. Most of the public has been left out of the equation, thus creating a sense of the remoteness of national politics itself. Formal institutions such as parties have provided a shell through which elites vied for power but rarely mobilized the wider population. In “populist” regimes, ruling parties such as Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Arab Socialist Union never secured a grass roots following comparable to Indonesia’s Golkar Party or Mexico’s Institutionalized Revolutionary Parties. As for the political parties of Arab monarchies, in a few cases, such as Morocco, political parties managed to sink some roots in society. But in the vast majority of cases, they are either illegal (as in Bahrain and Kuwait) and/or consist of informal groupings or factions led by notables that have informal ties to one or another faction of the ruling family.<sup>3</sup> Second, this process of depoliticization was buttressed by a “ruling bargain” by which the state promised jobs, social welfare, and security in return for the political quiescence of the wider population. Whether funded by oil rents, import substitution, and quasi-socialist public sectors, or by strategic grants and loans from the Superpowers (sometimes it was a combination of all three, as in Egypt), this bargain gave rulers a means to skirt the taxation/representation nexus that helped foster democracy in the West<sup>4</sup>. Third, precisely because most Arab rulers preferred patronage over brute force and co-optation over prisons or executions, they could develop an efficient military-security apparatus whose deadly claws were usually reserved for those who challenged the very foundations of the political system. Eschewing pure despotism, most Arab leaders

accommodated a range of ethnic, social, and religious groups, thus creating a level of incipient, if unruly, pluralism. Paradoxically, it is precisely this level of pluralism that abets the regime “survival strategies” of liberalized autocracies. By playing one group against the other, they divide their opponents, thus enhancing the regime’s room for maneuver and autonomy from any one group.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Arab rulers attempted to legitimate this live-and-let-live system by disseminating a communal or patrimonialist vision of authority that, even in its most “secular” version, relied implicitly on Islamic symbols to buttress the ultimate authority of the king or president.

During the 1980s, this merging of elite politics, patronage, selective repression, and patrimonialism came under pressure as the rents that had funded the “ruling bargain” declined. But this decline was never decisive enough to create a systemic crisis of sufficient severity to either topple regimes or to compel reformists and opponents to negotiate a new democratic bargain. Instead, the old bargain and its institutions were reworked and revised to create the foundations for today’s liberalized autocracies. In countries ruled by single parties, such as Egypt and Tunisia, this dynamic began when “reformers” such as Sadat or Tunisia’s Ben Ali literally invented opposition “platforms” (*munabir*) or formal parties. Because the leaders of these parties usually came from one faction or another of the ruling establishment, the liberalization of party life did not create parties with grass roots constituencies. Instead, it largely maintained the personal or familial networks that had long sustained traditional elite structures and that assured support within both regimes and oppositions for state-managed liberalization. As for the monarchies of Morocco, Jordan, and to some extent Kuwait, while they did not boast the ruling parties of their populist cousins, the close links between “opposition” party leaders and the king nevertheless ensured what was often a remarkable level of consensus. Moreover, given the lack of organic links between opposition parties and the wider populace in both populist regimes and monarchies, there was little basis upon which to mobilize a popular movement in favor of reforms that would challenge the basic rules of the game.

Still, this opposition-regime elite consensus came with a price: the opening of the legislative systems to a degree of competition sufficient to give opposition elites some voice but insufficient to give

them the institutional means (or authority) to overcome the ultimate power of the executive. The latter's dominance almost always is enshrined in the constitutions of the Arab world, which either explicitly give the monarch or president ultimate authority (as is the case in Morocco, Egypt, and Yemen), or implicitly do the same by not providing a decisive separation of powers that makes it possible for elected assemblies to represent the will of elected majorities.

During the early and mid-1990s, this arrangement invited periodic conflicts between legislatures and executives on a range of issues such as party and press laws. But no mainstream opposition parties questioned the basic rules of the game that animated liberalized autocracies. At worst, legislative-executive conflicts sometimes compelled leaders to dissolve parliaments, as was the case in Jordan in 2001, or to force the resignation of an existing cabinet, as was the case in Kuwait in 2002.<sup>6</sup> At best, clever executives initiated new “reforms” whose paradoxical consequence was to partly *strengthen* the executive. This was often accomplished by creating an upper house whose appointed or indirectly elected members have the authority to block the legislation of the lower house and thus can effectively defend the supremacy of the executive. Such was the case with Morocco’s constitutional reforms in 1996, with those of Algeria in 1996, and those of Bahrain in 2002.

Why do opposition forces tolerate or even embrace such regime-friendly constitutional reforms? One reason is that while such changes do not radically alter the balance of power between executives and legislatures, they still give opposition parties a chance to get in the game, or to build support among a wary and often distant public. In Algeria, Jordan, and Yemen, reforms at different times have made it possible for opposition parties to participate in multi-party cabinets, and in Morocco, to form a government that during the mid-1990s was led by the opposition. But since such cabinets do not wield ultimate authority, this only begs the question: Why participate in governments that at the end of the day, do not actually rule?

One answer lies in the fact that state managed power sharing arrangements can create space for social and ideological accommodations that would be difficult to sustain in more traditional win/lose democratic systems. Many Middle East states remain divided by sharp ethnic, religious, cultural, or ideological cleavages.

Because the most transparent and democratic of elections can make it possible for victors to use their mandate to disenfranchise their opponents, win/lose democracy often invites rather than diminishes conflicts over national identity (a point that the Bush administration is now learning in Iraq). Algeria's aborted election in 1992 was a case in point. There a host of groups—labor, women's organizations, many Berbers, and elements within the secular intelligentsia—supported or acquiesced to the military's halting of a second round of elections that would have brought the Islamic Salvation Front to power.<sup>7</sup> While the 8-year civil war that ensued showed that the total exclusion of Islamists from politics was a recipe for further bloodshed, Algeria's experience also illustrated the dangers of jumping head-long into a win/lose democratic system absent some minimal consensus over national identity. Thus, beginning in 1997, the regime and opposition parties adopted a system by which Islamists, liberal secularists, ethnic Berbers, and state apparatchiks shared seats in a parliament. While the latter had no real power, under its roof an aura of peaceful coexistence between different parties and identities emerged precisely *because* none of the parties could impose its vision of political community through the largely powerless legislature.<sup>8</sup>

Algeria may be the most dysfunctional example of liberalized autocracy, but it is hardly unique. In far away Kuwait, secularists and Islamists since 1992 have sat in a parliament that is probably the most vocal and obstructionist institution of its kind in the Arab world. While secular and Islamist parliamentarians occasionally have joined forces on issues such as foreign investment, none have challenged the complex set of formal and informal mechanisms that allow the royal family to prevent any one faction from actually controlling the parliament—or using an election victory to impose its cultural or social agenda on the rest of society. Since Kuwait's relatively open society gives Islamists and secularists opportunities to express themselves in parliament and in a variety of newspapers and civil society institutions, but also boasts a political system that makes it difficult for any faction to impose its agenda on other groups "democratically," there remains a high degree of consensus regarding the desirability of maintaining the status quo rather than moving to full democracy.

During the 1990s, the proliferation of civil society organizations in Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and Kuwait greased the wheels of liberalized autocracy. Unable to cope with the manifold social, economic, and humanitarian challenges facing the state, governments let nongovernmental or quasi-nongovernmental groups initiate programs in health, the environment, and education. Long-standing professional associations representing lawyers, journalists, businessmen, academics, doctors, and engineers also became more active and politicized as they attempted to become substitutes for ossified political parties. This dynamic served the interest of regimes whose very divide and rule strategies benefited from the fragmented nature of civil society. Yet given the absence of alternative avenues of mobilization, civil society activists embraced the opportunities that came their way, even as they occasionally challenged or defied the legal and constitutional restraints used by the state to limit their activities. As in the arenas of political party and parliamentary life, civil society activism helped to sustain liberalized autocracies because it offered advantages to both opposition and ruling elites.<sup>9</sup>

### **Islamists and the Limits of Liberalized Autocracy.**

Given the durability and partial legitimacy of liberalized autocracies, it might be argued that what works should not be fixed. But semi-authoritarianism comes with a huge price tag, not only for Arab societies but also for the United States. The most glaring cost is this: The very success of liberalized autocracy can make a transition to democracy difficult. Rather than open the door to a transition, state managed liberalization in the Arab world tends to close this door, or at least block its way. Why is this so?

To begin with, because of constitutional restraints placed on party and parliamentary life, political parties are often deprived of the opportunity to practice the arts of representation, mobilization, and compromise, all of which are vital to functioning political parties. Indeed, as the experience of Morocco, Egypt, and especially Algeria demonstrates, over time parties that play the liberalization game can lose legitimacy precisely because they participate in a system which the society views as bogus, illegitimate, or irrelevant. Civil society organizations may have grown in number, but, in

their present configuration, most do little to resolve this problem. Indeed, their political activism carries with it a double cost: On the one hand, it often undermines their capacity to defend their specific professional interests, while on the other, it does little to bolster specifically political organizations such as parties or parliaments. Most civil society organizations cannot substitute for either, and thus cannot compensate for the essential weakness of *political society*, by which I mean a coherent set of institutions whose specific role is to mobilize and represent competing interests of the populace. Finally, it should be noted that the economic development strategies of liberalized autocracies have not created the social foundations for more robust representational politics. On the contrary, because their endurance hinges on tolerating a variety of public and private sector economic actors (and manipulating them in ways that sustain the regime's maneuverability), most liberalized autocracies have skirted the tough political choices involved in promoting genuine market reforms. Relying on rents of one kind or another, many have depended on a muddling through strategy in both the economic and political realms.

Islamists have often been the most vociferous critics of such muddling through strategies. They have assailed vigorously the repercussions of trying to integrate Arab states into a globalizing system, whose economic and especially cultural underpinnings are said to be alien to "Muslim" values. But despite or perhaps because of these critiques (which enhances their social standing among the urban poor), Islamists have been the primary beneficiaries of liberalized autocracy. It is not simply a matter of their control of mosques and charitable institutions. The essential issue is that this control gives Islamists a capacity to mobilize and thus emerge as the only true *representative* nonstate institutions, by which I mean those that have organic and organized links to society itself. Paradoxically, though, this privileged position owes much to the Islamists' long-standing and sometimes cozy relationship with certain segments of the ruling elite or party, a fact of life in Yemen, Kuwait, Jordan, and even Egypt. Thus, for example, while Mubarak's government periodically has repressed radical Islamists, it has not only given a fairly wide berth to mainstream fundamentalists by ceding control to them of Al-Azhar

University, it has also tolerated and thus effectively condoned the courts' periodic persecution of reformist Islamist thinkers such as Cairo University's Dr. Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid.<sup>10</sup>

This advantageous combination of being outside and inside the state helped Islamists make substantial gains in elections during the early and mid-1990s, a development that often threatened to overturn or destabilize the delicate balancing act that liberalized autocracies counted on for their survival. As a result, a pattern of opening and closing, liberalization and deliberalization, emerged in many Arab states. In Yemen the ruling General Popular Congress (GPC) first relied on its alliance with the Islah Party to neutralize the secular Yemeni Socialist Party, but then used machine politics and physical intimidation during the 1997 elections to reduce dramatically Islah's seats in the parliament.<sup>11</sup> In Jordan, King Hussein rewrote the election laws to create constituencies that favored tribal over Islamist identities, then passed a new press law that increased the state's power to censor journalists arbitrarily. His son, King Abdullah, went even further in 2001, when he dissolved parliament and ruled by decree for a 2-year period during which elections were postponed twice. A similar pattern thus far has not emerged in Morocco, where the two mainstream nationalist parties so far have retained enough support to limit the gains of the Justice and Development Party (JDP). But this situation may only be temporary. Knowing full well that any sweeping victory might antagonize the authorities, during the 2002 parliamentary elections the JDP *chose* not to run a full slate of candidates. In the wake of the elections, the JDP emerged as the third largest party in parliament—a politically comfortable position that enhanced its credibility among its followers, while reassuring the king and his allies in the secular parties and security apparatus that they still called the shots. In short, far from encouraging a regime-opposition dialogue on how best to move beyond limits of state managed pluralism, liberalized autocracy often promotes a zero-sum, state versus society stand-off that, from the vantage point of the regime, raises the risk of genuine democratization. The resulting retreat by the state saps the regime of legitimacy, thus guaranteeing the day when a new leader emerges to declare a reopening of the system, a new day of dialogue and trust that eventually gives way to apathy and/or disillusionment.

The costs of this destabilizing cycle for Arab leaders has been high. It has widened the gulf between rulers and populace, while hindering the creation of modern political institutions that can galvanize the public. Because renewing this system hinges on securing a new leader—a King Abdullah in Jordan, a King Mohammed in Morocco (or perhaps, a new King/President Gamal Mubarak in Egypt)—liberalized autocracy rests on the potentially unstable foundations of individual personality. This fact is of utmost importance to the United States since the vast majority of our friends in the Arab world preside over liberalized autocracies. The United States has hitched its wagon to a political system that appears capable of survival, but not of much dramatic economic or political change, and which thus remains vulnerable to internal and external shocks. Moreover, as we found after 9/11, many of these regimes or elements within them tolerate or occasionally encourage mainstream Islamists, many of whom not only express anti-American, anti-Israeli, and even explicitly anti-Semitic views but also oppose some of Washington's most forward looking policies, such as the very *idea* of a two state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The question thus arises: Can or should the United States do anything to help Arab governments and oppositions exit the trap of liberalized authority?

## **What is To be Done?**

If President Bush's recent speeches on the subject of Middle East democracy are to be taken at face value, it certainly appears that his administration is fed up with business as usual. But on the level of actual policy, there is a wide gap between Bush's neo-Wilsonian rhetoric and the realpolitik logic that has guided our Middle East democracy aid programs. After all, for nearly a decade now, these programs, by design or default, have sustained rather than undermined liberalized autocracy. The package of aid projects the United States has promoted in Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Yemen—and which it is continuing to promote through its Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)—focus on the usual suspects: strengthening civil society, promoting the participation of women, giving technical advice to parliaments and parties, or encouraging trade and market economic reform.<sup>12</sup> While these are

worthy goals, the assumption that this largely bottom-up, “demand side” approach eventually will compel regimes to undertake a transition from liberalization to democracy is dubious. Because demand side programs skirt the essential problem, *which is the nature of state ideologies and state power*, by themselves they cannot help reformers and opposition forces exit the circular path of liberalized autocracy. Absent a *supply side* approach that promotes from above constitutional and institutional reforms that empower legislatures to represent, and opposition parties to mobilize, alternatives to both the official ruling parties and to their Islamist opponents, American aid policies might help improve the overall quality of political life, but they are unlikely to promote actual democratization.

That said, in and of itself, such caution is not unwarranted. A sudden or messy departure from a piecemeal, demand side approach could carry with it risks that could outweigh the benefits of maintaining the status quo. The most obvious of these risks is a democratization process that would hand the mantle of rule to Islamists. Faced with the revolutionary prospect of Islamists in power, moderate Arab reformers might be quickly out maneuvered by hard-line opponents of all reform. The latter would push for a retreat to full autocracy and, in so doing, polarize the political field. Indeed, it is this very prospect that helped sustain the political purgatory of liberalized autocracy. The challenge for the administration is to devise some way of assessing where and when the risks of a democratization strategy are sufficiently low, such that it can be implemented without reinforcing the position of Islamists and their hard-line opponents in ruling regimes. As Samuel Huntington once put it, there is no easy choice, and, it is worth adding, no easy yardstick by which we can measure the costs and benefits of political liberalization versus democratization.

The most suitable candidate for a democratization strategy would be an Arab state whose electoral system is already sufficiently independent and competitive, such that, if and when Islamists do enter a genuinely open election, they must face, negotiate, and ultimately share power with non-Islamist parties. A multipolar political arena that contains the challenge of Islamist parties is an absolute necessity. Unfortunately, there are few candidates that meet this criterion. As I have already noted, liberalized autocracy

tends to benefit Islamist parties, thus producing a zero-sum regime-opposition conflict that makes democratic compromise difficult. For this reason, the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Bahrain will be very hesitant to embrace any kind of strategy that moves beyond the limits of political liberalization.

The one Arab state whose leaders eventually might entertain such a move is Morocco. While the credibility and legitimacy of Morocco's non-Islamist political parties has diminished over the last decade, the two largest secular parties, as well as several other smaller parties, command sufficient public support such that no Islamist party could hope to rule other than in a multi-party coalition. Moreover, as a monarchy, Morocco enjoys a structural advantage that the Arab world's presidential systems lack: a leader who is not tied down by one ruling party, and who thus can serve as an arbiter who brokers compromises over social, cultural, legal, and economic policy.<sup>13</sup> This brokering function is formalized in a constitution that, despite its democratic provisions, gives the king ultimate and supreme power over the legislature and the cabinet—when and if he should choose to use it. Such eclecticism gives the king the power to appoint cabinet members regardless of whether or not they speak for political parties. Any democratization strategy worth its salt would have to change the provision through a constitutional reform that would clearly require the formation of cabinets that represent elected majorities. Moreover, this reform would have to provide, at the very least, for the direct election of the upper house.

Would Morocco's young king, Mohammed VI, be ready for such a move? It is hard to know. Having inherited a constitution that already was amended twice, there is ample precedent for him to help his countrymen move beyond the limits of liberalized autocracy. With bold leadership, and a readiness of all parties to cooperate on the negotiation of a new democratic pact, such a move is not inconceivable. Still, given the country's huge income disparities and the capacity of Morocco's urban poor to mobilize, a democratization strategy would entail considerable risks. King Mohammed alluded to that very point when he stated, more than a little defensively, "that each country has to have its own specific features of democracy"—an implicit, if obvious, rationale for maintaining Morocco's own brand of liberalized autocracy.<sup>14</sup>

## **Conclusion.**

The Bush administration has not chosen the path of encouraging democratization of liberalized autocracies. Rather than find even one Arab country that might be suitable for a genuine democratization strategy, it has hitched all its hopes on a policy of military intervention and regime change in Iraq. The guiding assumption here, it seems to me, is that the eclectic legacy of semi-authoritarianism is so deeply embedded in the social, economic, and political soil of the Arab world that there can be no hope of genuine political reform unless one Arab country is given the chance to demonstrate for the entire region how to get it right *from the very beginning*. To put it in both political science and medical terms, the administration believes that the scourge of “path dependency” can only be removed by transplanting the political heart of the region’s sickest patient: Iraq.

This assumption is as compelling as it is troubling. It is compelling in the sense that, however sick the patient, Iraq has always suffered from a malady that afflicts nearly all Arab states: a basic lack of consensus over national identity. The divisions between Shi'a, Kurds, and Sunnis in Iraq may be sharper than those between Berbers and Arabs in Algeria or Morocco, or between secularists and Islamists in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen; but the problem of how to pursue democratization in societies divided by profound ideological, social, or ethno-religious differences is present in every Arab state.<sup>15</sup> As noted earlier, this problem arises from the capacity of democracy to reward one group repeatedly at the expense of others. When elections reproduce the same winners and losers over time, the latter have no rational reason to support democracy. Faced by the possibility of their “democratic” exclusion, they will often prefer autocracy or revolt over free elections.<sup>16</sup>

The solution to this “democracy dilemma” in Iraq was to impose through violence, intimidation, and oil-financed patronage a particularly vicious form of full autocracy in the name of “Arab nationalism.” In an interesting echo of Bolshevism, although this ideology claimed to speak for the (Arab) “masses” or “people,” in practice it was designed to defend or rationalize the particularistic interests of the Sunni minority in general, and the Saddam Hussein Tikrit-based super minority clan in particular. If the United States

can, by force of arms, destroy this cynical system and replace it with a successful experiment in democratic power sharing, one can readily imagine that such a happy outcome might eventually inspire other Arab leaders and their oppositions to negotiate democratic solutions to identity conflicts. In this sense, the administration's reasoning is compelling, even if it rests on a political and military "experiment" (to use Kanan Makiya's own words) whose odds of success were at best 50/50 when the United States and its partners embarked on the Iraq campaign in March 2003.

Since then, the odds have gone down considerably, so much so that the experiment in Iraq eventually may produce the very opposite result intended by the United States: more rather than less autocracy in the Arab world. This is why the Iraq gambit from the start was—at least in the opinion of this author—even more troubling than it was compelling. The chances of success always were small because, to prevail over the long term, any credible power sharing arrangement between Kurds, Shi'a, and Sunnis would have required—among other things—a long-term political and especially military commitment from the entire *international community*. As in Kosovo and Bosnia-Hertsogravina, the international community for the foreseeable future would have to take on the state's most important function: maintaining a monopoly over the means of coercion. This was especially true in Iraq, since it would be years, if not decades, before any new Iraqi military or police force would have the nationalist credibility and military discipline to resist the centrifugal forces of ethno-religious conflicts that Saddam Hussein's fall released. When the United States chose to go it alone, it effectively gave up the crucial symbolic and political umbrella it needed to transform what many Iraqis viewed as an American-led invasion into an internationally blessed and secured liberation. Thus many Iraqis—and not merely the Sunnis—have come to view the current unhappy situation through the lens of the "1920 Revolution," when Shi'ites and Sunnis joined in common cause against the British.

We can only hope that the current—and certainly belated—effort to internationalize the Iraq gambit will reverse what appears to be a growing Sunni-Shi'ite insurrection. But even if the United States is lucky enough to contain the insurrection and secure a long-term political and military commitment from the United Nations and/

or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to rebuild Iraq's political and military institutions, much damage has been done already in Iraq, and in the wider region as well. The liberalized autocracies of the Arab world always had a distinctive solution to the dilemma of political reform in divided societies. Rather than opt for either full democracy or full autocracy, they have promoted experiments in state-managed power sharing that have endured precisely because ultimate power rests in the hands of the state. As we have already noted, in Kuwait, Algeria, Bahrain, and Jordan, liberalized autocracy allows for a kind of peaceful coexistence in parliaments whose lack of authority is, paradoxically, the precondition of social peace: So long as no one group actually wins or loses—or actually wields real power on behalf of elected majorities—the system can totter along. Viewing the chaos in Iraq, many Arab leaders, from both regimes and oppositions, probably will conclude that trying to fix this novel, if flawed, system is foolish. In societies where traditional values and norms remain strong, a preference for the supposed comforts of stability may once again prevail, eclipsing the few noble and courageous voices who have dared clamor for democracy.

## ENDNOTES

1. *Freedom in the World 2003, The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Liberties*, New York: Freedom House, 2003.
2. See Daniel Brumberg, "The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy," in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Daniel Brumberg, eds., *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, pp. 35-47. On Russia, see Harley Balzer, "Managed Pluralism: Vladimir Putin's Emerging Regime," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2003, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 189-227. For a good comparative analysis of semi-authoritarian regimes, see Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenge, The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003.
3. Michael J. Willis, "Political Parties in the Maghrib: Ideology and Identification," *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Autumn 2002, pp. 1-28.
4. Lisa Anderson, "Arab Democracy: Dismal Prospects," *World Policy Journal*, Fall, 2002, pp. 55-60. Quote from p. 58, originally cited in Roxanne Roberts, "Morocco's King of Hearts," *Washington Post*, June 21, 2002.
5. Daniel Brumberg, "Authoritarian Legacies and Reform Strategies in the Arab World," in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble, eds., *Political*

6. On Jordan, see Russell E. Lucas, "Deliberalization in Jordan," in Diamond, Plattner, and Brumberg, eds., pp. 99-106. On Kuwait, see Michael Herb, "Emirs and Parliaments in the Gulf," in *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East*, pp. 84-106.

7. See Michael Willis, *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria: A Political History*, New York: New York University Press, 1996.

8. See Ahmed Mahiou and Jean-Robert Henry, eds., *Où va l'Algérie?* Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2001.

9. See Amy Hawthorne, "Middle East Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Working Papers, Middle East Series*, Democracy and Rule of Law Project, No. 44, March 2004. Also see Vickie Langohr, "Too Much Civil Society, Too Little Politics, Egypt and Liberalizing Regimes," *Comparative Politics*, January 2004, pp. 181-204.

10. Geneive Abdo, *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Note that I do not accept Abdo's thesis that Islam had "triumphed" in Egypt. That said, the nature of the regime does tolerate and often encourages Islamist activism and thinking.

11. Jilian Schwedler, "Yemen's Aborted Opening," in *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East*, 2003, pp. 91-98.

12. On MEPI, see the program's web page, <http://mepi.state.gov/>. In my discussions with MEPI officials, they have made it clear to me that MEPI's main thrust is political liberalization rather than democracy. The latter, I am told, is simply too risky, given the advantages that Islamists enjoy.

13. The amendment of Morocco's Islamist-friendly Family Code, approved by the country's Senate in January 2004, offers an excellent example of this function. The king's intervention secured changes in the code that met some of the demands of women's groups, but also reassured Islamists by placing the application of the code's provisions in the hands of judges, whose conservative inclinations make it likely that their rulings will not offend Islamists. At the same time, the bill's passage reaffirmed the king's authority as *Amir al-Mu'minin*, or Commander of the Believers.

14. Lisa Anderson, "Arab Democracy: Dismal Prospects," *World Policy Journal*, Fall 2002, pp. 55-60. Quote from p. 58, originally cited in Roberts.

15. See Milton J. Esman and Itamar Rabinovich, eds., *Ethnicity, Pluralism and the State in the Middle East*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988.

16. For the classic statement of this problem, see Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977. More recently, see Donald Horowitz, "Democracy in Divided Societies," in Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner, eds., *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Democracy*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.